


WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Genocide is a word with enduring talismanic power, but how, why and when is a mass atrocity labeled as such and do we place too much stock on such labels anyway?

The bloodied clothes of victims of the Rwandan genocide hang from a wall at a genocide memorial inside the church at Ntarama, just outside the capital, Kigali. Some 5,000 people, mostly women and children, sought refuge in the church in April 1994, but were massacred by Hutu extremists who used clubs, grenades and machetes to kill them [Reuters]



Words by
Simon Adams

 SimonAdamsR2P

In August 2004, a German minister used a public platform in a foreign land to “accept ... [Germany’s] historic and moral responsibility” for the deaths of an estimated 65,000 men, women and children massacred by machine guns or driven into the wilderness to die. Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul, Germany’s minister of development, apologised for the killings which she described as constituting genocide.

But Wieczorek-Zeul was not discussing the Holocaust. She was talking about Germany’s little known war against the ethnic Herero of Namibia, which was a German colony when these atrocities took place in 1904. While the history of the destruction of the Herero is not well known outside of Africa it is regarded by some academic specialists as the first genocide of the 20th century.

Interestingly, while the destruction of the Herero predates the Armenian genocide by a decade and the Holocaust by even longer, it contained many similar elements. The Herero were seen as a racial and political threat to the German colonial project in south west Africa. An exterminationalist policy was rigorously implemented and morally justified. The Germans even built a ‘concentration camp’ on sandy Shark Island, off the coast of Namibia, to contain, punish and exploit Herero survivors. Scientific experiments were conducted on those who died, with Herero skulls boiled and shipped to universities in Germany. No wonder recent scholarship has described this as “the kaiser’s holocaust.”





French investigators examine the wreckage of Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana's plane, which was shot down on April 6, 1994. The Rwandan genocide began in the hours that followed the incident [Reuters]



The fact that these events happened 40 years before the word 'genocide' was even invented makes this history all the more shockingly premonitory. It was not until 1944 that Raphael Lemkin, a Polish-Jewish lawyer and refugee, coined the term genocide while intellectually grappling with the magnitude and meaning of the destruction of European Jewry. Lemkin combined the Greek word for race or tribe, *geno*, with the Latin word for killing, *cide*. Lemkin wrote that alternatively, "another term could be used for the same idea, namely, *ethnocide*": meaning nation-killing. The important thing was to capture the essence of the crime – the systematic decimation of a people.

Less than a year later, on January 27, 1945, the Red Army liberated the death camp at Auschwitz. Human rights would never be the same again. The end of the war combined with the emotional and intellectual revulsion at the Holocaust helped make possible the creation of the United Nations. Lemkin's obscure term also rose to prominence. The word genocide appeared in the indictment against Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg and inspired the development of the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide.



The Convention defines genocide as involving “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical (sp), racial or religious group”. It has since become a central component of customary international law. Despite this, over the following half a century the international community’s ability to make good on the post-Holocaust promise of ‘Never Again’ was dismal. From the killing fields of Cambodia to Bosnia, signatories to the Convention failed to uphold or enforce it when it was needed most.

Rwanda marks an especially dark chapter of this ignoble history. Twenty years ago on the night of April 6, 1994 Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana’s plane was shot down in circumstances that remain disputed. What is indisputable, however, is that Rwanda’s genocide began in the hours that followed. Over the next 100 days an estimated 800,000 human beings were systematically murdered at roadblocks, in the streets and even in churches where thousands sought sanctuary. There were no death camps or gas chambers. This was a sickeningly efficient genocide carried out mainly with farm implements in a remote corner of Africa that no one cared about.



Pictures of people killed during the Rwandan genocide are installed on a wall inside the Gisozi memorial in Kigali [Reuters]



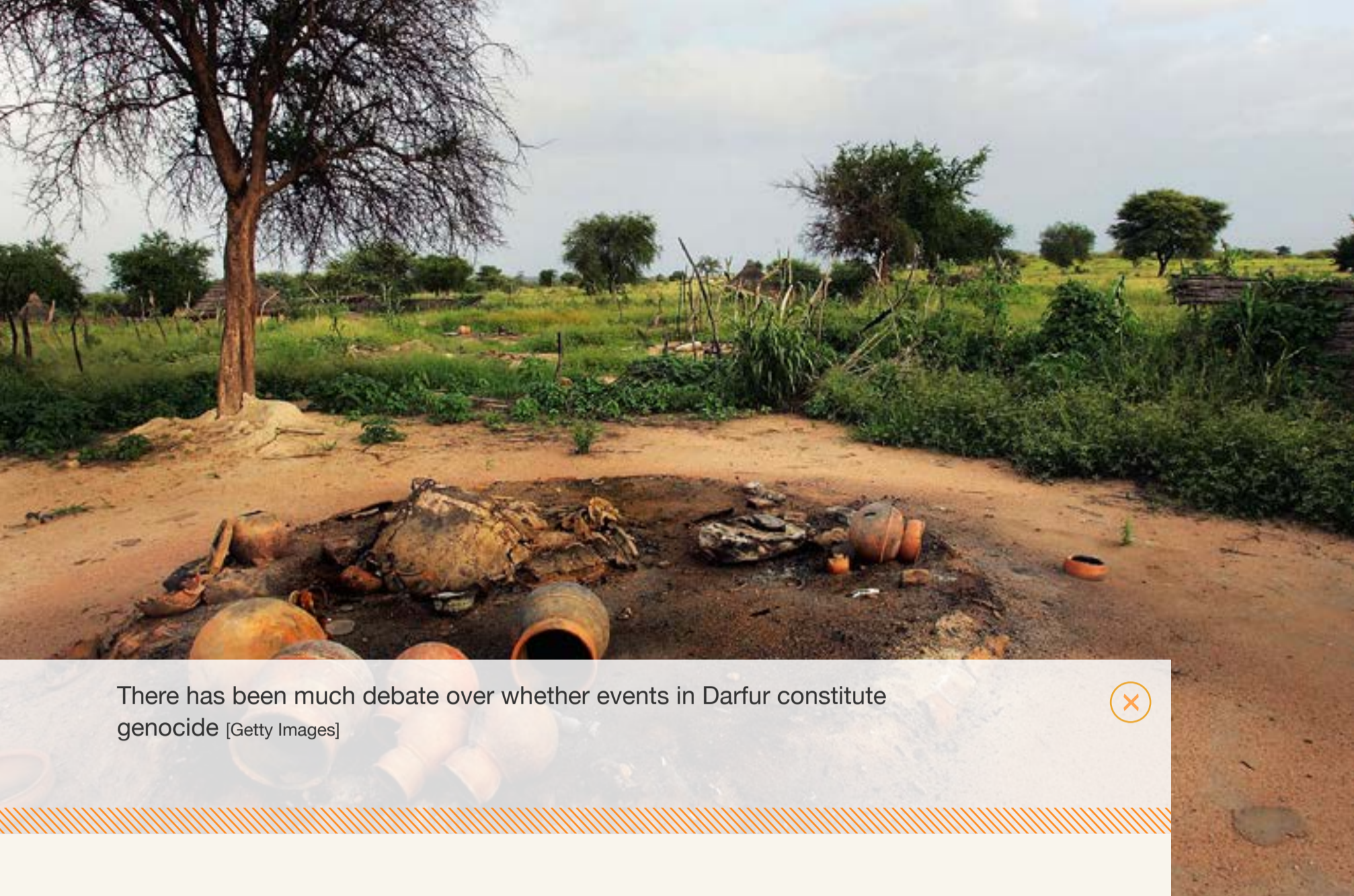
No country outside of Africa bathed itself in glory when it came to the Rwandan genocide, but the behaviour of the world's sole remaining superpower, the United States, is especially jarring. As early as April 11, just five days after the downing of the presidential jet, the US government's confidential internal documents predicted that a potentially "massive (hundreds of thousands of deaths) bloodbath" could ensue. Meanwhile in a now notorious inter-agency discussion paper produced a month later, the government urged diplomatic caution. Under the heading, "Genocide Investigation", the paper warned: "Be careful. Legal at State was worried about this yesterday – Genocide finding could commit USG [the US government] to actually 'do something'." Just one year after the deadly 'Black Hawk Down' episode in Somalia, the US government was determined not to do anything dangerous in Africa.



The US government's nervousness was based upon Article I of the Genocide Convention which placed a legal – as distinct from moral - obligation upon states who were signatories to “undertake to prevent and punish” the crime of genocide regardless of where it was occurring. US officials therefore studiously avoided describing Rwanda as a genocide until the country was already littered with around 800,000 corpses.

The entire debate reflected the enduring talismanic power of the word genocide. The resulting ethical debacle then repeated itself, but in reverse, 10 years later. In September 2004, US Secretary of State Colin Powell told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee “that genocide has been committed in Darfur” and “genocide may still be occurring” there. Powell was consciously adopting an activist diplomatic stance in the misplaced hope that describing what was happening in the Darfur region of Sudan as genocide would mobilise the UN Security Council to act to end atrocities there. It was a miscalculation.

In fact, as legal scholar Rebecca Hamilton has shown, Powell was so compromised by his spectacularly dubious “weapons of mass destruction” powerpoint presentation at the UN a year earlier, a precursor to the US-led invasion of Iraq, that there was an elevated sense of diplomatic scepticism regarding his evidence of genocide in Darfur. Moreover, despite an extensive five-month investigation by the US State Department, his own legal adviser's comment on the evidence was that, “we can justify it one way, or we can justify it the other”. In other words, while it was clear that mass killings were occurring in Darfur, it was not clear that these constituted genocide.



There has been much debate over whether events in Darfur constitute genocide [Getty Images]



By contrast, in January 2005, the report of a Commission of Inquiry authorised by the UN Security Council found that “the government of the Sudan has not pursued a policy of genocide” in Darfur. The Commission found that crimes against humanity and war crimes had been perpetrated and that tens of thousands of civilians had been killed. But there was no “genocidal intent” on behalf of Sudan’s government. This finding was further complicated when in 2010 the International Criminal Court indicted President Omar al-Bashir for genocide in Darfur.



The Darfur case revealed an awkward legal and definitional dilemma. Rwanda, where those carrying out the genocide loudly and proudly stated their intention to exterminate the Tutsi, was an exception. There was a long history of targeted violence against ethnic Tutsi, of public incitement to murder, and of organisation aimed at these ends. The events following the downing of the president's jet were a culmination of this process. The genocidal intent was clear.

Not so in most other cases where intent was cloudy and the nature of the mass atrocities developed and deepened over time. The Holocaust, in which six million Jews died, was clearly genocide. Homosexuals, by comparison, were routinely persecuted by the Nazis and an estimated 15,000 were sent to concentration camps where an unknown number died. The intent, however, was not to physically destroy all gay men as an identifiable group. The Bosnian village of Srebrenica, where approximately 8,000 Bosniak men and boys were rounded up and murdered by Serbian soldiers, was genocide. The 1998-2003 war in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, where mass atrocities were perpetrated and several million civilians are estimated to have possibly died, was not.



German troops in south west Africa, now Namibia, in 1904. One-hundred years later, Germany's minister of development apologised for the massacre of 65,000 ethnic Herero men, women and children in what some scholars consider the first genocide of the 20th century [Getty Images]

Nevertheless, the power of the word remains. In 2007, a civil society organisation launched “1-800-GENOCIDE”, a hotline for US citizens to phone and “lobby their elected officials on important Darfur and Sudan-related initiatives”. There have also been numerous attempts by governments to invoke the word genocide for partisan purposes. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin claimed that genocide was being committed against ethnic Russians in South Ossetia, Georgia, during 2008. These claims proved to be exaggerated and almost universally rejected, although they did provide justification for Russia’s invasion of South Ossetia and war with Georgia.

Hamilton, who authored *Fighting For Darfur*, has commented that one lesson of the Save Darfur campaign was “that it is unwise to place so much stock in a label – even one as potent as genocide”. We should certainly exercise due diligence when applying the word genocide to any mass atrocity situation. Determining the exact extent, intent and outcome of specific mass atrocity crimes remains a question of evidence, argument and judgment.

We see in the Central African Republic, Syria and several other situations today, the incipient ‘seeds of genocide’. But seeds don’t always grow. Lemkin gave the crime a name, but he left it to us to figure out how to prevent it.

Dr Simon Adams is the executive director of the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect.

The views expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera’s editorial policy.